Considerations of South-Central Ontario Secondary Teachers for Accommodating Students Experiencing Academic Anxiety

By

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the experiences of three south-central Ontario secondary teachers related to accommodating students with academic anxiety or high stress levels. The research question is What do secondary teachers from south-central Ontario school boards consider when deciding on accommodations for students experiencing academic anxiety? In extension, I investigate barriers that teachers face while trying to support students with academic anxiety and which supports teachers value most when accommodating for students with academic anxiety. The participants were interviewed individually and in person through semi-structured interviews lasting between 40 and 90 minutes. The themes that arose from the participants’ experiences were that teacher philosophies, supportive relationships with students, and student autonomy were the three important factors that contribute to appropriate and effective accommodations for students with academic anxiety effective. Barriers teachers faced while trying to accommodate for students was a lack of training and mental health professionals available for resource sharing and support. Future research should investigate student perspectives on the effectiveness of collaboration with teachers and student autonomy on reducing stress and anxiety levels. Additionally, teacher training programs should highly consider differentiating training for various levels of background knowledge and maintaining a continuous – not-isolated – learning experience for teachers to maintain knowledge on current issues surrounding mental health.

**Key Words:** anxiety, stress, mental health, student-teacher relationships, student autonomy, teacher training, mental health professionals, secondary
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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the Research Study

Anxiety is a broad and intimidating issue that finds itself the topic of discussion in many educational settings. In North America, between 10% and 20% of adolescents will experience an anxiety disorder (Auger, 2011). Diagnosed anxiety disorders are considered a barrier to learning because they “can interfere significantly with academic performance and success” (Lean & Colucci, 2010). Anxiety disorders can manifest in a variety of ways depending on the specific disorder. These disorders include but are not limited to: phobias, panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and social anxiety disorder. Obsessive-compulsive disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder are no longer classified as anxiety disorders, but include anxiety as a major component of the illness. These diagnosed disorders can involve both medical and psychological interventions to work towards academic success for the student (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2014). However, students may have significant mental health needs despite lacking a medical diagnosis; many students that teachers encounter will have anxiety symptoms that require addressing. (Auger, 2011). Academic anxiety, for example, is experienced by many students and for the purposes of this research paper I will be defining academic anxiety as high levels of stress related to school performance that interferes with academic performance and success.

Academic anxieties such as test writing anxiety or content-specific anxiety interfere with a student’s ability to effectively learn content and are likely to result in a lack of motivation and engagement (Cassady & Fletcher, 2010). In a survey done by the Canadian Teachers’ Federation (2012), 79% of teachers agreed that stress was a pressing concern for their students, and 73% of teachers agreed that diagnosed anxiety disorders were a pressing concern. Because of the
increased concern for these two closely related issues, this research paper will investigate both high stress levels and anxiety, under the umbrella term *academic anxiety*.

Teachers have limited ability to help students cope with mental illness, but it is essential to student success that teachers are aware of how stress influences students and what can be done to alleviate any unnecessary or unproductive stress. In order to have this knowledge, teachers need the appropriate training. In a 2012 survey, the Canadian Teacher’s Federation discovered that 87% of teachers agreed that lack of teacher training is a potential barrier to providing mental health services to their students. Over two-thirds of the surveyed group reported having no training at all, and of the teachers who had training, just under half had received the training from their school or teacher organization (Canadian Teacher’s Federation, CTF, 2012). This means that in order to receive training, most teachers had to go outside of their profession, despite needing the training to work more effectively. Teacher training is essential to student success because of a teacher’s unique position to influence a student’s life. With training, teachers can take on a role that works to accomplish the three goals for schools as suggested by TeenMentalHealth.org: reduce stigma, identify mental illness in students and intervene, and promote a school curriculum that meets mental health promotion (Meldrum, Venn, & Kutcher, 2009).

Training in adolescent mental health can only prepare teachers to a certain degree. However, with knowledge of and access to other professionals specially trained to support adolescents struggling with mental health, teachers can direct students to receive the proper support. Teachers can also go to these professionals as a source of guidance and resources that may help them to better accommodate students in the classroom. These professionals may include guidance counsellors, nurses, social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists, special
education teachers, and educational assistants. Despite the incredible importance of these professionals to students’ success and well-being, teachers report that an insufficient number of these community-based professionals are available (CTF, 2012).

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study changed over the course of my time researching. The focus was always on student anxiety, but the specificity of this topic saw change. Originally, the purpose of my research was to investigate the ways that teachers accommodate for academic anxiety in students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). In interviewing the participants, I discovered they could speak more to academic anxiety in general and had less experience with students that have ADHD. The findings of my research still presented interesting points for discussion and for this reason I decided to keep my results and change my purpose to investigating how teachers accommodate for academic anxiety in all students. As a result of changing the purpose after the interviews had taken place, my research questions and literature review (Chapter Two) were edited retrospectively. How teachers can address anxiety in students with ADHD will be addressed in Chapter Five, Implications.

Researching the current circumstances surrounding accommodations for students experiencing anxiety is necessary to gain insight to the steps education systems can take to improve student success and mental health. The Mental Health Commission of Canada completed a report (2013) that outlined specific recommendations with regard to school-based mental health in Canada. Among the five recommendations were the following needs:

- Ensuring adequate numbers of trained mental health professionals in schools;
• Investment in evidence-informed mental health promotion/social emotional learning initiatives within a school context, including… maintaining an updated directory of evidence-informed practices; and
• Systematic professional learning in mental health for educators, parents, and students.

My hope for this research project is that it will contribute to the literature on what best supports students experiencing academic anxiety so that future school-based initiatives may have a more complete understanding of the current need for mental health professionals in schools and adequate teacher training. Additionally, I hope this research project may be a resource for educators to use when considering when and how to accommodate students experiencing academic anxiety.

1.2.1 Research questions

The question this research project addresses is: What do secondary teachers from south-central Ontario school boards consider when deciding on accommodations for students experiencing academic anxiety? In extension, I would like to investigate:

i. Barriers that teachers face while trying to support students with academic anxiety; and

ii. What supports teachers value most when accommodating for students with academic anxiety.

1.3 Background of the Researcher

My interest in academic anxiety arose from my own personal experiences. As a student in elementary, secondary, and post-secondary school, high performance in school was my top priority. This led to high levels of stress at a relatively young age. I frequently worried about my grades, constantly feeling the need to prove that I was superior to my peers. With this degree of competitiveness, I often interpreted any situation in which I did not perform at a standard higher
than my peers as a personal defeat. In my senior grades of secondary school, my competitiveness and academic anxiety began to affect me quite negatively. I frequently went to my teachers with teary eyes, worried that I would not be able to complete an assignment. I detested group work because I did not trust any other student to perform to my standards, so I always chose to take on most of the work load. These additional responsibilities contributed to my already high stress levels. The climax of my academic anxiety was in my second year of my undergraduate degree when I tried to double major in Biology and Mathematics. Completely overwhelmed, I ended up performing far below the class average and especially far below my own standards. This forced me to re-evaluate my habits and expectations, then focus on improving my mental health as a way to regain control over my academics.

My own experiences with academic anxiety may be different from many or even most of the students that experience anxiety related to school. Thinking about how deeply I was and am affected by academic anxiety has inspired me to research possible ways that teachers can help limit academic anxiety or help students develop healthy coping techniques. Because I did not cope with stress well and allowed it to affect my performance, it did not matter that I was a typically high achiever – anxiety still had the ability to lower my confidence which resulted in less engagement and lower grades. My personal experiences made me aware that academic anxiety can affect students’ emotions and success profoundly, so as I begin my own career as an educator, this research project will allow me to explore a relevant issue that both students and teachers face.

1.4 Overview

Chapter One introduced academic anxiety, discussing the purpose and significance of the study for myself, as well as the research and educational communities. Chapter Two will provide
an in-depth analysis of the current literature on academic anxiety, including the effects of stress on students and barriers to supporting students, the role of teachers in supporting students’ mental health, and barriers that teachers face while trying to accommodate for students with mental health issues. Chapter Three outlines the methods used in the research project. Chapter Four presents and discusses the analyzed results of the interviews and literature review. Chapter Five discusses the implications of the results for myself as a researcher and teacher, and also for the educational community as a whole.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this chapter I review the literature on academic anxiety including how stress affects students’ performance in school, the role of teachers in reducing student stress, and teacher perceptions of barriers to supporting students with anxiety and other mental health issues. With the overview of these topics, I explain the relevance of this research project and address how it might contribute to the current literature.

2.1 Influence of Academic Anxiety on Student Success

Academic anxiety may manifest differently for each student, but there are commonalities in how it affects the students. Anxiety causes the learner to lose varying degrees of control over their thoughts, beliefs, behaviours, and emotions and it affects their ability to attain certain goals, including academic goals. When trying to cope with stressful situations, anxiety may severely inhibit students’ motivation and engagement (Fletcher & Cassady, 2010, p.177). For this reason, anxiety is considered to be a possible factor that contributes to students’ decisions to drop out of school (Meldrum, Venn, & Kutcher, 2009). To better understand how and why academic anxiety influences adolescents, it is beneficial to consider the anxiety through developmental and psychological perspectives; the physical development of adolescents and the psychological processes related to self-regulation influence how students are affected by stress and how they cope with academic anxiety.

2.1.1 The role of development in adolescent anxiety

The social, emotional, and academic stress that adolescents experience is often attributed to their phase of development. In elementary and middle school years, students are in the psychosocial development stage that Erik Erikson refers to as industry versus inferiority (Woolfolk, Winne, & Perry, 2012, p.88). In these younger years, which may carry on to early
secondary school, students are looking to find confidence through mastering different skills while being compared to others. This is the beginning of a self-conscious life that is greatly accentuated when the children reach puberty and enter adolescence. As students get older, they are faced with increased pressure to perform well in their academics, sports, and their social circles all while being confronted with rules and regulations that restrict their independence (Woolfolk et al., 2012, p.89). In adolescence, Erikson described the major focus and stressor as the “search for identity.” As a teenager, there is a struggle to determine beliefs, abilities, and responsibilities in order to form a “consistent image of self” (Woolfolk et al., 2012, p.89). This idea likely contributes to Piaget’s idea of adolescent egocentrism, which describes teenagers’ extreme self-consciousness and belief that they are constantly being judged and watched (Woolfolk et al., 2012, p.38). This results in “increasingly accurate evaluations of ability and heightened social comparison” which has the consequence of students’ beliefs and expectations for success declining as they go into middle school (Fletcher & Cassady, 2010, p.177-178). During development, the changes their brains undergo also influence attention, motivation, and risk-taking behaviour (Meldrum, Venn, & Kutcher, 2009). In navigating these developmental milestones, adolescents often struggle to cope with expectations to perform well in school, which may result from and/or lead to a lack of self-regulation.

2.1.2 The role of self-regulation in academic anxiety

Research has provided evidence that in the early years of education, self-regulating skills such as inhibition and attention influence a student’s level of readiness (Fletcher & Cassady, 2010, p.177). Two of the researchers contributing to this body of evidence, Blair and Diamond (2008) define readiness as a result of motivation and emotions complementing executive function processes such as working memory and mental flexibility. That is to say, for a student to
be ready to learn a concept, they need to be motivated and emotionally resilient enough to complete possibly challenging tasks that require them to use their executive function processes. It was also concluded that greater self-regulation is typically found in individuals that manage a balance between systems of “emotional arousal and cognitive control, rather than the dominance of one over the other” (Blair & Diamond, 2008). When students are too aroused in stressful situations, it is difficult for them to think clearly, they perform poorly in their academics and are also reported to be poorly adjusted to the classroom. These students tend to struggle with inhibiting impulsive behaviours, paying attention in class, and completing assignments. These students are typically reprimanded by their teachers who, moreover, have developed low expectations for the students’ abilities. This results in the student having a negative emotional association with school (Blair & Diamond, 2008). The stress that these students experience in school due to self-regulation issues have a compounding effect that leads to a decrease in self-esteem (Crocker, 2002), which may explain why anxiety is a contributing factor that results in students dropping out of school, as previously mentioned (Meldrum, Venn, & Kutcher, 2009). Feeling overwhelmed by anxiety can also lead to the use of counterproductive coping strategies such as procrastination, defensive pessimism, and self-handicapping (Alexander & Onwuegbuzie, 2006; Fletcher & Cassady, 2010, p.178; Martin & Marsh, 2008). Anxiety has been found to reliably predict when students could not effectively cope with daily struggles associated with school, such as learning difficult concepts, receiving poor grades, meeting deadlines, and exam pressure (Martin & Marsh, 2006, 2008). It seems that the effects of poor self-regulation and low self-esteem act as entry points to a cycle of poor academic performance and high academic anxiety. How these students are encouraged to cope with their anxiety is
essential to escaping this cycle and working towards well-being and academic success. Teachers are in a unique position to offer this encouragement and support.

2.2 Teacher Influence on Student Academic Anxiety

Classroom teachers have a great ability to influence student stress. How educators decide to teach in their classroom, how they assign work, how they interact with students, and how they respond to student behaviour all contribute to student emotions and the decisions that student may make to cope with those emotions. This may be done proactively, through the development of a safe and productive learning environment or reactively, through explicit teaching of strategies to cope with stress.

2.2.1 Teachers creating safe and productive learning environments

Because of the relationship between mental illnesses, engagement, motivation, and school drop out rates (Meldrum, Venn, & Kutcher, 2009), it is important to consider the possible influence of increased engagement on academic anxiety. Many of the practices used in research to increase student engagement hold great potential for decreasing the frequency and/or effects of academic anxiety. Research by Klem and Connell (2004) link teacher support to greater student engagement and academic achievement. They found that students who felt their teachers listened to them, cared about their performance, explained the rules, and had high expectations of them were almost three times as likely to have high levels of engagement. This decreased the likeliness that students would have high rates of disruptive behaviour in class, be absent, and drop out of school (Klem & Connell, 2004). For those students who continue to struggle with engagement, teachers should be aware of how their responses to these students may be perceived. In a study by Skinner and Belmont (1993), students that were behaviourally disengaged received less attention from teachers compared to their engaged and successful peers,
intensifying their desire to withdraw from activities. Students also need to feel that they are able to make important decisions for themselves. This idea of autonomy support, where teachers allow students freedom to make decisions about their behaviour and education, has shown to increase student motivation and engagement (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Another instructional strategy that has shown great increases in student motivation and engagement involves the idea of proximal self-motivation. Bandura and Schunk (1981) described the effects of breaking up large tasks into smaller parts or goals that students could work towards. These smaller goals that could be attained sooner rather than later led to increased engagement, increased perception of self-efficacy, increased competence, and increased interest. These results can be related to those of Blair and Diamond (2008) that were previously discussed, where students who become overwhelmed with stress cannot think clearly and become disengaged. For some students, large tasks or long lessons may be daunting, and will result in feelings of anxiety and/or disengagement; chunking lessons and tasks is a practice already in use in classrooms, but its effectiveness can be supported by this research.

An interesting article by Kim (2005) contrasted the effects of constructivist teaching to traditional teaching on students’ academic performance and learning skills. The constructivist approach to teaching requires students and teachers work together to construct an understanding of material, rather than having the teachers present content to passive learners. This heavily student-centred way of learning helps students understand concepts in a more meaningful way than the repetition involved in traditional, teacher-centred teaching (Kim, 2005). It was concluded that teaching students with a constructivist approach that were accustomed to traditional styles improved academic performance, motivation, and attitudes towards learning. However, levels of anxiety and worry about school performance increased for students learning
through a constructivist approach. This research raises an interesting issue: in a time where student mental illness is part of a great dialogue, the method of teaching that we are moving towards completely adopting may be a contributing factor to their academic anxiety. This study did not investigate the level of stress experienced by the students, the effects of the stress on the students, nor the exact cause of the stress, but it is important that teachers consider their teaching styles as a possible trigger of anxiety for certain students. Considering the benefits associated with constructivist teaching, perhaps this research supports the need for a balance between constructivist and traditional teaching styles.

Although high engagement is not indicative of low academic anxiety, nor vice versa, there is a relationship between the two: as previously mentioned, when students are experiencing levels of stress they are unable to cope with, their engagement and motivation declines. Ensuring that students feel they are supported by their teachers, have some level of autonomy, and are taught in a manner with both structure and an appropriate degree of constructivist teaching may proactively decrease the risk of academic anxiety and disengagement.

2.2.2 Explicitly teaching strategies to cope with academic anxiety

Creating a safe and productive learning environment can be used as a proactive method to decrease the possibility of students experiencing academic anxiety. In many cases, students will have anxieties that will require greater support or in some cases intervention, and the research discusses several strategies that teachers may use to support students in coping.

Many of the strategies to help students cope with anxiety are related to managing and improving learning skills. Teacher support to improve self-regulation skills has been linked to academic performance and it is believed that managing these skills will have the greatest long-term impacts for students with possible academic anxieties, especially when taught in younger
grades (Fletcher & Cassady, 2010, p.186). It is important however, when considering strategies for students to try, that teachers explore options that meet the needs of the learner and are specific to their unique situation.

One method of coping that has proven short-term benefits is emotion-focused coping. These coping methods involve the student taking part in an exercise or activity for an immediate release of stress. “Fostering optimism” and dispelling unrealistic worries can help students develop a calm demeanor when approaching a stressful situation (Auger, 2011, p.150; Fletcher & Cassady, 2010, p.180) Students can also regulate their negative emotions through certain exercises. How a student is able to regulate their negative emotions will depend on their preferences; breathing or relaxation exercises are a common technique (Auger, 2011, p.142; Fletcher & Cassady, 2010, p.180). Lastly, students may release their negative emotions through other outlets, perhaps though physical exercise (Fletcher & Cassady, 2010, p.180). Emotion-focus coping methods have proven to be effective in reducing negative emotions related to test anxiety, but is not effective for all stressful experiences. The strength of emotion-focused strategies is that they effectively reduce great emotional reactions to stressful situations, but they are most effective when used with problem-solving strategies (Fletcher & Cassady, 2010, p.180). Problem-solving coping strategies involve “clos[ing] the gap between self-perceived ability and external indicators of ability” (Fletcher & Cassady, 2010, p.181). This can be done through improvement of self-regulation skills that help students monitor and achieve their goals. These skills include seeking help, improving study techniques, planning and organization, and managing homework. When these skills and habits are continuously worked on and associated with positive outcomes indicating capability, the practices will become automatic for the student (Fletcher & Cassady, 2010, p.182).
When working with students to develop coping strategies, it is important to seek collaboration with other professionals such as guidance counsellors, as they are likely to have a deeper understanding of what the student is experiencing (Auger, 2011, p.142). Additionally, it is likely that students with anxiety may have other mental illnesses that need to be considered and professionals with more thorough training on how to support these students should be consulted (Auger, 2011, p.152). In combination with ensuring a safe and productive learning environment, explicitly working on self-regulation skills will help motivate and engage students that experience academic anxieties.

2.3 Barriers to Properly Addressing Academic Anxiety and Student Success

In recent surveys, teachers have expressed their frustration with certain barriers that prevent them from fully supporting students and guiding them to achieve their academic goals. The vast majority of teachers hold the belief that mental health is an issue that schools need to address (Reinke, Stormont, Herman, Puri, & Goel, 2011; Graham, Phelps, Maddison, & Fitzgerald, 2011; Froese-Germain & Riel, 2012). Thus, in the majority of cases where students do not receive support from teachers, the issue likely does not lie in the teachers’ beliefs about mental health; teachers are finding that they are unprepared due to a lack of training and are unable to connect students to mental health professionals that should be more present in schools.

2.3.1 Teacher training

In the study conducted by Reinke and colleagues (2011), only 28% of teachers believed they had the knowledge required to meet the mental health needs of their students. This feeling of unpreparedness may be a result of the lack of training the teachers reported to have. This evidence that teachers are lacking training is further supported by a survey done by the Canadian Teacher’s Federation (2012). The most common methods of training were through workshops,
in-services, and staff development, but teachers still expressed a need for additional training on strategies for working with students with externalizing behaviour problems including classroom management techniques, and recognizing and understanding mental health issues. Lack of training was one of the top four reasons why teachers believe students needing mental health services fall through the cracks (Reinke, et al., 2011). Another interesting aspect of this study was that nearly half of the teachers surveyed had never heard of the term “evidence-based practice.” Considering that there is a growing body of research on evidence-based practice, this result indicates a great gap between research on effective strategies in teaching and accommodating students with mental health issues and the actual practice of doing so (Reinke, et al., 2011).

2.3.2 The missing mental health professional

Mental health professionals that support schools in intervening with student mental illness can include psychiatrists, psychologists, child and youth workers, nurses, and social workers. Staff of the school such as guidance counsellors or special education teachers are not mental health professionals but are trained in accommodating for students with mental illness and can also provide resources and support to teachers that have students with anxiety. Although a number of positions exist for the purpose of supporting student mental health, teachers have expressed a need for a greater number of mental health professionals in schools. Lack of mental health professionals was one of the top three barriers to supporting students as reported by teachers (Reinke, et al., 2011). Teachers not only claim a need to have more support from mental health professionals in school, but have also more coordinated services between the school and the community to support teachers in addressing student mental health (CTF, 2012). Even with
training, there are certain roles that cannot be filled by teachers; to have the support of these professionals is essential to student success.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter investigated the current literature surrounding the effects of academic anxiety, how teachers can affect students with academic anxiety, and the barriers that teachers face in trying to support these students. Academic anxiety has a proven negative effect on student engagement, motivation, and academic performance (Blair & Diamond, 2008; Fletcher & Cassady, 2010, p.177; Meldrum, et al., 2009). The relationship between engagement and anxiety is important for teachers to be aware of as it may explain disengagement in learning environments that utilize constructivist teaching strategies or do not utilize chunking, or where students do not feel supported by their teachers (Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Kim, 2005; Klem & Connell, 2004). High engagement does not automatically imply that students are not experiencing academic anxiety, but to explore the presence of any overlap between strategies to increase engagement and strategies to decrease anxiety would be a beneficial contribution to the literature and the practices that are considered a universal design for learning (UDL). Teachers have several responsibilities when accommodating for students with academic anxiety: they must create a safe and productive learning environment in their classroom and they must utilize the resources available to them in order to understand student needs and know when a student requires intervention. A great problem lies in these resources that teachers have available to them. The majority of teachers are not properly trained to recognize or support students with mental health issues such as anxiety (CTF, 2012; Reinke, et al., 2011).

This research project aims to explore the current strategies in use by south-central Ontario secondary teachers to accommodate students experiencing academic anxiety and/or high
stress levels and their reasoning behind these strategies. This is to contribute to the literature focused on beneficial accommodations for students with academic anxiety, and to investigate the possibility for a UDL approach to addressing problems of disengagement, low academic success, and academic anxiety. A second large focus of my research is to illuminate the current barriers that these teachers face and the opinions the teachers hold on what supports are most necessary. This portion of the research project will be able to present a partial record of the current state of teacher supports for accommodating students with anxiety in secondary schools. In the next chapter, I will outline the methods employed by this research project to accomplish these aims.
Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter reviews the methodological details. The qualitative approach and procedures are explained followed by a description of data collection and participants. The method of data analysis and the ethical review procedures are then outlined. Methodological limitations are specified along with the strengths that the research project presents despite certain restrictions. Lastly, the chapter concludes with a brief overview of the main methodological decisions that this study entails.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

This qualitative study on accommodating students with anxiety had two methods of research. A literature review was performed to investigate the current knowledge on how stress affects students, what the role of teachers is in reducing student stress, and what barriers make accommodating for these students difficult. This information provided me with greater insight on the topic, and informed the development of my questions for my second method of research: the semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted with each participant individually and were the main source of data collection.

3.1.1 The qualitative nature of the study

Academic anxiety affects students differently, thus teachers have to accommodate in response to these differences. This research project aims to explore the varying responses from teachers and the rationale behind their decisions. Because of the unique position that teachers hold with regard to implementing school-based initiatives and responding to students, it is crucial to the success of these initiatives that teacher perspectives are understood concerning barriers they might face and the effectiveness of current systems in use. This research project is therefore best suited as a qualitative study because it has the goal to gain insight to the participants’
perspectives on the issue at hand (King, 1994). Quantitative approaches would be inappropriately used in this context because it would limit the information that could be received from participants. Quantitative studies look at measurements of certain variables, comparisons and possible correlations, and variance in phenomena (Silverman, 2010). Although a quantitative study could be done to determine techniques in use and the resources available to teachers, it would over-simplify the complexity of knowing students and responding appropriately to their emotions. Qualitative research is also appropriate when a problem needs further exploration and theories need further development (Creswell, 2013, p.48). Due to the complexity of anxiety and the different ways it can affect individuals, there will always be opportunities to further develop our understanding. Teachers will be finding new techniques to accommodate anxious students through an iterative process as the research continues and our understanding deepens.

3.1.2 Narrative and case study frameworks

This research project uses methodology similar to both narrative and case studies. Through semi-structured interviews, I was able to learn about my participants’ professional histories and how their experience influences decision-making in accommodating students with anxiety. In narrative studies, the researcher will collect stories from one or very few individuals in order to gain insight into their life experiences. The oral histories given by the participants have a specific focus, which in this instance is their experiences accommodating for academic anxiety. These experiences were placed in a chronology so that I might understand possible changes over time and the relationship between past and present events. (Creswell, 2013, pp.70-73). How a teacher was trained, the resources the teachers have available to them, and how their experiences in teaching has affected their practice over time is all important to the analysis and in
There are also features of this qualitative study that seek to act as a case study approach. Case studies investigate an event or multiple events that are to be studied in-depth (Creswell, 2013, p.97). The purpose of a case study can be compared to the usage of anecdote or story in everyday reference: a story is used to enlighten a person or group of people on a certain issue or phenomenon through generalization (Simons, 2014). Creswell (2013, p.99) states that in order to best generalize the data collected from a case study, “the inquirer needs to select representative cases for inclusion in the qualitative study.” I do not intend to represent the participants’ actions as generalizable to all students experiencing anxiety due to the vast differences between individuals and specific situations that contribute to the anxiety. However, the intent of my research is to learn about possible techniques and accommodations that may contribute to more informed decisions on how to help students with anxiety, which may be seen as a less powerful form of generalizing.

There are two types of case studies that this research project resembles: instrumental and collective. Instrumental case studies have the intent of gaining a better understanding of the problem that occurred in the case, unlike intrinsic case studies which only look to describe the case in detail (Creswell, 2013, p.99). This research project uses the cases in which the participants had a student experiencing anxiety that received accommodations to elucidate the current techniques that are and are not effective in helping anxious students. However, this study also reviews the experiences of several teachers from different schools. Because of this feature, it also resembles the collective case study approach. Collective case studies investigate multiple cases that all share a common issue (Creswell, 2013, p.99). I selected participants from different
schools so that the study might include a variety of experiences and techniques used to face the common issue of anxious students.

For both narrative studies and case studies, a variety of techniques are employed in order to gather data and create a more thorough description of the experiences being discussed, however interviewing is often the primary method (Creswell, 2013, p.105). This study only makes use of participant interviews, and this choice of methodology will be discussed in the next section, Instruments of Data Collection.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The primary instrument of data collection was a semi-structured interview protocol. I developed interview questions and conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants individually. Questions focused on learning about the teachers’ professional backgrounds, their experience with students with anxiety, and the resources available to them as teachers. Semi-structured interviews were found to be appropriate for this research project due to the balance they offer between an organized set of questions and a free conversation. Structured interviews are comparable to questionnaires, where each question must be asked to every participant in the same manner, in the same order, and without additional conversation (Brinkman, 2014). These structured interviews are uncommon in qualitative research as the participants’ responses are often focused on quantifiable data (King, 1994). Semi-structured interviews provided opportunity for the participants to further explain specific decisions and emotions while still aiming to gather certain information from the participants. This technique also allowed me to add probing questions when an answer could benefit from further elaboration. Permitting the use of probing questions allowed me to further understand the complex experiences of the participants that could not have been detailed using the exact same questions for each participant.
An important feature of interviewing is that the interviewee is comfortable to share their experiences without risk of judgement or backlash. Interviewing in a location with minimal distractions and where the participant feels able to answer and share ideas candidly is essential for the collection of data (Creswell, 2013, p.164). For these reasons I invited the participants to choose their own preferred interview locations, with the suggestion that they keep in mind possible distractions and privacy of their answers. The interview was audio-recorded and transcribed to text shortly after.

3.3 Participants

In this section of the methodology chapter, I outline the criteria that my participants were required to fulfill in order to be considered for involvement as well as how I contacted and recruited the participants. The section titled Participant biographies introduces the participants and explains their experience in teaching students with anxiety.

3.3.1 Sampling criteria

Three participants were selected based on their ability to fulfill the following criteria:

- Has taught as a full-time teacher for at least 5 years;
- Have experience adapting their pedagogy to better suit students with anxiety; and
- Have demonstrated leadership, commitment, and/or expertise in the area of accommodating students with anxiety.

I required that my participants have at least 5 years of experience teaching full-time to ensure that they have had numerous and varying experiences witnessing student anxiety and providing accommodations in their own classrooms. Diversity of experiences is important especially in case studies as it allows for a more complete description with multiple perspectives (Creswell, 2013, p.156). The situations involving student anxiety will vary between schools,
classrooms, students, and teachers because anxiety can be caused by a number of different factors and manifest differently in different students. The more varied the experiences of the participants, the more information can be gathered to provide data on different anxiety triggers and anxiety-reducing classroom strategies. In addition to asking about the types of experiences my participants have had, some of my interview questions ask how their attitudes toward and beliefs about anxiety and techniques for accommodating anxious students have changed over the course of their career. With at least 5 years of experience as a teacher, the participants will have had more time to form their beliefs about academic anxiety and learn about the accommodations required.

Given that the purpose of my research is to learn how teachers enact responsive pedagogy for students with academic anxiety, I required my participants to have experience that they can discuss where they have attempted to accommodate or have accommodated for a student with academic anxiety. I also required that my participants have demonstrated leadership or expertise in the area of my research topic to ensure that the data collected will not only involve common anxiety triggers and accommodations, but might also provide insight to less common situations or very severe situations that many teachers may be unaware how to approach effectively and professionally.

3.3.2 Sampling procedures

Purposeful and convenience sampling were employed in equilibrium when finding participants. Each participant fulfills all the sampling criteria and have meaningful experiences to contribute to the data, as required (Creswell, 2013, p.156). However, the sampling procedure was also based on convenience, as I have limited networking among educators as a candidate teacher and I could only interview willing participants. Convenience sampling is a common method used
when studies such as my own are limited by time and resources (Flick, 2009). I spoke with my previous associate teachers from my first year placements and other teachers I knew to ask if they or a colleague suit the criteria and would like to participate in my study. I also communicated with my peers in the 2014-2016 Intermediate/Senior cohort of the Masters of Teaching program to search for eligible participants. I chose participants from different schools in south-central Ontario so that I had participants with diverse experiences demonstrating a variety of techniques. Multiple cases, as discussed in section 3.1, can offer different perspectives that offer a more thorough understanding of the issue in a collective case study (Creswell, 2013, p.99). I contacted the potential participants via email which outlined my research question, the sampling criteria, the involvement required of the participants, my contact information and a brief note describing that the research project is a requirement of the Master of Teaching degree at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto.

3.3.3 Participant biographies

In this section, I outline the relevant histories of the participants including their education, any additional training they have received, and their teaching experience.

3.3.3.1 Angela

Angela has 14 years of experience teaching in secondary school north of Toronto, and has been working for the public secondary school she is currently at for 5 years where she is leading the literacy program. She has previously taught science, was science department head, and was a guidance counsellor for four years. Angela is also the equity designate of her school which is a position that addresses current issues in the school that are related to race, gender, religion, and other equity topics. Most recently, she coordinated the establishment of a gender-neutral washroom and a prayer room at the school.
Angela received her Bachelor of Education from the University of Toronto, which did not include any mental health training. Her training related to mental health includes all three parts of the guidance additional qualifications and the ASSIST training to prevent suicide. She has also attended two mental health conferences with students in the past two years.

3.3.3.2 Madelyn

Madelyn is currently a secondary geography teacher in a public secondary school north of Toronto. She has been teaching secondary for three years full time, and supplied in secondary schools for six years. Prior to teaching secondary school, Madelyn was teaching grade eight for seven years. At her secondary school, she runs the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA).

Madelyn received her Bachelor of Education from Nipissing University, which did not include any mental health training. Currently, Madelyn is enrolled in a Masters of Education program at Nipissing University. Her training related to mental health includes all three parts for Special Education. All other mental health training she has received has been through in-school professional development.

3.3.3.3 Lucas

Lucas is a secondary science teacher and science department head in a Catholic school board north of Toronto. He has been teaching in secondary for ten years at three different secondary schools. The second school he worked at was an alternative education school specifically for students with mental illnesses that needed alternative schedules and programs to complete their high school diploma.

Lucas received his Bachelor of Education from Western University. He has no additional qualifications related to mental health, special education, or guidance.
3.4 Data Analysis

After interviewing the participants, I transcribed the interviews, adding in any notes I took during our conversations. To interpret the data, I coded the transcripts in an iterative process where I noted salient points, as well as similarities and differences between the three participants’ answers. Coding involves grouping the data and assigning labels (Creswell, 2013, p.184; Saldana, 2009, p.3). In coding the transcripts, I made use of both descriptive codes and In Vivo codes. Descriptive codes summarize the primary topic of the quotation, according to the interpretation of the researcher, whereas In Vivo codes took the quotation exactly as it was said by the participant (Saldana, 2009, p.3). An important purpose of qualitative research is to understand the perspective of the participants rather than to have the researcher assign meaning to an issue. For this reason, the codes were not predetermined, as this would have jeopardized the interpretation of the data and prevent thorough analysis (Creswell, 2013, p.185). The codes gathered from the initial analysis of the data were then collected into larger categories which were then organized once more into three themes. Organizing the codes and categories was not a simple process of labelling, but was a “cyclical act of linking ideas” to one another (Saldana, 2009, p.8). The themes that were decided upon provide insight to the greater meaning of the data through the presentation of common ideas (Creswell, 2013, p.187). These themes were Teacher Philosophies, Supportive Relationships with Students, and Student Autonomy and will be discussed in detail in chapter four. After analyzing each transcript individually, the three transcripts in combination with the literature review were compared and contrasted to find commonalities as well as unique differences that will be discussed in chapters four and five.

I developed themes according to the techniques used by case study researchers. Case study researchers hope to see relevant meanings emerge from the codes, as I did when finalizing
my themes (Creswell, 2013, p.199). In some cases, I also used direct interpretation, where the researcher “looks at a single instance and draws meaning from it without looking for multiple instances” (Creswell, 2013, p.199). Due to my small sample size, some of my participants presented unique experiences and I did not wish to exclude valuable data. With the codes and themes gathered, case studies attempt to make naturalistic generalizations to present what may be learned from the study (Creswell, 2013, p.200). Although my main goal is to share the experiences of the participants rather than completely generalize, I do hope that this project presents data that can be used by teachers and schools to make informed decisions when accommodating for students with academic anxiety.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

Participants were given a letter of consent confirming their willingness to participate in the interview (Appendix A). A copy was given to the participant for reference and the original was retained for my records. The letter informed the participants that interviews will be conducted at a time and place suitable for them and all information about the participants’ identities remains confidential, which involves excluding any identifying markers to their schools or students and assigning the participant a pseudonym. While there are no known risks to participation, the letter also informed the participants that the topic of anxiety may trigger an emotional response depending on their experiences with anxiety. Lastly, I informed them that they may refrain from answering any question that makes them uncomfortable, as suggested by King (2007), or may withdraw from the study at any time.

At the beginning of each interview I reviewed my research question and reminded the participants of my respect to our confidentiality agreement, and that they have the right to refuse an answer to any questions, or remove themselves from the study entirely at any time. To
minimize the potential risk of emotional responses, I offered a few minutes at the beginning of the interview for the participants to review the questions, if they wanted to.

My course instructor and teaching assistant are the only other individuals that reviewed the results and final paper, which the participants were informed about in the letter of consent. Data from the research is currently stored on a password protected computer with access allowed only by the researcher. After a maximum of 5 years, all data will be deleted to ensure the participants’ privacy.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

With a limit of 18 months to complete the research project, only three participants could be interviewed. Although this limits the amount of data that can be collected, it is important to remember the specificity that comes with qualitative research results. Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) explain that the purpose of qualitative research is not to make the collected data generalizable, but to interpret specific events and cases. Although I do seek to make naturalistic generalizations similar to a case study, the data more strongly proposes considerations while making informed decisions on accommodations for anxious students rather than actual suggestions of actions to take.

A second limitation was that the only method of collecting data that I had permission for within the ethical parameters of the study was through the use of semi-structured interviews. According to Creswell (2013, p.105), while interviews are commonplace in case studies, observations and the collection of documents such as journals kept by the participants are also important. Despite this limitation, semi-structured interviews still offer the study an appropriate method to gather data. One-on-one semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to focus the interview on the collection of certain data points without restricting the interviewee from
elaborating and sharing their perspectives (Brinkman, 2014). The ability of the participant to discuss certain answers more in-depth can also act as a form of self-reflection that may elicit certain emotions or epiphanies important for data analysis. Given the time restrictions, semi-structured interviews were the most effective way of gathering rich and in-depth data from a small sample size.

Because the participants were selected based on their expertise in working with students that have academic anxiety, this presented a limitation in how much information I could gather on the barriers that teachers face. It is assumed that the barriers faced by experienced teachers will be shared with less experienced teachers, however, less experienced teachers may struggle with barriers that teachers like my participants could easily overcome. Without interviewing less experienced teachers, this study possibly ignores barriers that new or inexperienced teachers face. Guidance counsellors, specialists in Special Education, or teachers with several years of experience at an alternative school for students with mental illnesses would likely navigate teaching with more experience and confidence, but they were chosen regardless due to their invaluable advice and insight into teaching students with academic anxiety.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter reviewed the details of methodological decisions. This qualitative research project uses features of both narrative and case studies to gain insight into the teacher participants’ experiences accommodating students with academic anxiety. A qualitative approach allows this research project to explore how secondary school teachers are accommodating for students but most importantly, the rationale behind their decisions. Semi-structured interviews, chosen for their allowance for elaboration beyond structured questions, were used as the main data collection method. Participants are required to have 5 years of experience as a full-time
teacher, to have actual experience accommodating for students experiencing academic anxiety in their classrooms, and to have demonstrated leadership or commitment to accommodating students with academic anxiety. The participants were contacted by email through networking with previous school placements, colleagues, and peers. Data was organized into codes and themes that were recognized by similar ideas and can be interpreted for the purpose of making informed decisions in future practice while accommodating anxious students. Although there was a minor risk of emotional trigger depending on the participants’ experiences with anxiety, the participants were allowed to review the interview questions at the beginning of the meeting and decide at any time which questions they did not want to answer. The limitations of small sample size, the single method of data collection, and the missing voice of inexperienced teachers restrict the amount of data that can be collected, but hold their merit in the fact that the data collected through interviews cannot be generalized to a larger population regardless of sample size but still offer the best opportunity for the experienced participants to validate their experiences and share their invaluable perspectives. In the next chapter, I report the research findings.
Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

This chapter is dedicated to the presentation and discussion of results found through interviews with the three participants about their experiences with students facing academic anxiety. The participants, who are referred to with pseudonyms to protect their identity, offered valuable insight into what is required of a teacher to competently and meaningfully accommodate a student with anxiety. Although there was overlap between themes, it was clear that teacher philosophies, supportive relationships with students, and student autonomy leads to an increase in confidence and a decrease in academic anxiety, with potential to increase student success.

4.1 Teacher Philosophies

Being a teacher is about more than teaching the curriculum. The participants discussed that to make a difference for students requires a certain type of teacher that is interested in learning throughout their career, is aware that academic anxiety can have longstanding effects on students, and can handle the demands of the job. Below, I outline these three factors associated with teacher philosophies and how they relate to student success.

4.1.1 Interest in continuous learning

Despite the three participants having no mental health training from their Bachelor of Education, they all shared each other’s passion of life-long learning to continually improve their pedagogy. Continuous learning was described to me in three ways: in the form of official training such as in-school Professional Development (PD) or Additional Qualifications (AQs); in the form of learning through collaboration with fellow professionals to share best practices; or in the form of critical and reflective practice. An interest in continuous learning is essential to student success because it allows teachers to stay updated on student issues. Angela noted that
current equity issues were completely unknown to educators when she began teaching; the
teachers that do not educate themselves on these issues make accommodating for these students a
difficult task. Angela spoke about the response from her colleagues when she introduced the idea
of installing a gender neutral washroom in the school for gender fluid students:
  
  Like, “gender fluidity?” Half the people wouldn’t even know, what is that? I think if
there is a feature that’s [preventing students from being supported] is this lack of – it
sounds bad – but... lack of keeping up. Being aware of “oh my God, this is something
that, a new issue that the kids are facing.” I think that’s where we lose a few.

Teachers like Angela are upset to learn how uninformed some of their colleagues are, as it makes
it difficult to create a safe school environment when many of the staff are unaware that it can be
unsafe for some students.

4.1.1.1 Additional qualifications and in-school professional development

While many teachers do not take AQ courses related to mental health, Madelyn and
Angela both credited a great part of their expertise to their AQ experiences. Angela had taken all
three parts of her Guidance qualifications and eventually worked as a guidance counsellor for
four years. When asked what made her gain such an interest in student well-being, Angela spoke
of a student who had attempted suicide that she only encountered because of her position in
guidance. A “rude awakening,” this experience opened her eyes to the effects of anxiety and
other mental illnesses on students’ quality of life. Since then, Angela has worked to stay
informed of student well-being and spread this knowledge among her coworkers. Madelyn had
taken all three parts of the Special Education courses and attributes much of her classroom
management ability and her strong, positive relationships with her students to the information
she learned from these AQs.
Although AQ courses benefit teacher practice, there is a high level of commitment required. Perhaps for this reason, the participants spoke of more relevant in-school PD as being a realistic solution for schools whose students are experiencing high levels of academic anxiety. Madelyn spoke very highly of PD at her school, where guest speakers are occasionally brought in to deliver educational presentations. However, she noted that attending PD is not what gives teachers experience, it is the willingness to learn from the PD and being open to new information. To make the training educational, teachers cannot “have their guard up” before a presenter speaks. Regardless of what a teacher could be doing during that time, such as grading student work, Madelyn noted that teachers need to make use of the opportunities when they are presented to them.

4.1.1.2 Teacher collaboration

The most casual and constant form of learning for teachers seems to be collaborating and learning from other teachers and staff. Regardless of a teacher’s qualifications, all participants discussed the supports that can be received from the special education department or guidance counsellors, provided those offices are willing to help. Unfortunately, it seems the support from guidance offices and special education departments varies greatly from school to school, and certain schools and their students suffer without this collaboration. As evidence, Angela noticed that now that she is no longer a part of guidance, she feels less aware of the state of the students’ well-being. How this lack of communication is affecting the students in her school is unknown to her. In Madelyn’s experience, she noticed how different schools could be depending on the guidance and special education offices:

[T]here was one school I worked at and the head of the special education department, he was an incredible leader – phenomenal... And it was sort of different than what I
see at my school where the head of the special ed. department has their office, she
shuts the door, and she’s closed off, and you only talk to her when it’s an emergency.

The [Educational Assistants] never go to her because they’re afraid of her.

This inconsistency shows that teachers cannot be alone in supporting their students with anxiety; involvement of other staff, especially those with expertise, is necessary. Other collaborative relationships might be between the teachers and support workers that come into the school such as psychologists, Child and Youth Workers (CYWs), and social workers. As a guidance counsellor, Angela especially valued the expertise of the social worker that came in and often went to her for resources and advice. However, workers such as these are not always available to schools, as pointed out by Angela and Lucas who have expressed a need for more workers to be present in schools. Angela’s school only has a social worker available for half of the day, once a week. She expressed how stressful this lack of support was for her:

[I]f something bad was to happen during the week I would always hope for it to be on a Tuesday because I knew my social worker was in the next day... And I keep asking her all the time, “How can I get you for more days?” But unfortunately I’m sharing her with five other schools I think.

Lucas’s previous experience in an alternative education system exposed him to an environment where these support workers were almost always in the school and willing to collaborate with teachers to help the students. In the alternative setting, Lucas and his coworkers were given time at the end of each day to speak with experts, “which is a luxury you don’t really have in a mainstream secondary classroom.” Where these supports may be almost or entirely absent, the students unknowingly suffer the consequences. The wishes of Angela and Lucas to have more
support from mental health professionals mirrors the need that was found in studies done by Reinke et al. (2011) and the Canadian Teachers’ Federation (2012).

When specialized professionals are unavailable, collaborating with other teachers to develop strategies is another way for teachers to learn throughout their career. All participants mentioned that they had spoken to other teachers for advice on a student or help with a situation. Each teacher in a school has different strengths and it is wise to make use of teacher interactions and learn from each other. However, communicating with the right teacher can be difficult. Lucas, Madelyn, and Angela all expressed a need for more communication between teachers in one way or another, and Madelyn explicitly suggested the creation of a venue where teachers can share best practices. A convenient and professional way for educators to communicate with each other has the potential to address the issues concerning student support and teacher education.

4.1.1.3 Reflective practice

A practice engrained into the habits of many preservice teachers is being reflective. Feigning reflexivity is an easy task, but it is true and critical consideration of teacher practices that is crucial to maintaining continuous pedagogical improvement. Critical reflection on experience requires teachers to consider “moral, political, and ethical contexts of teaching. Issues pertaining to equity, access, and social justice are typically ascribed to critical reflection” (Howard, 2003; see also Calderhead, 1989; Gore, 1987). In considering how teaching strategies affect students’ emotional well-being, teachers can build a responsive pedagogy that is based on both teacher and student growth. As an example, Angela explained a situation in which she changed a test date due to schedule conflicts. When the students broke out into cheers and thanked her because they had several other tests that week, she was conflicted:
[T]hey were like, “Miss, why are you not happy?” “Because you all wanted the test date changed yet nobody asked me.” So maybe they’re not feeling as comfortable as I thought initially... nobody felt comfortable enough to come and tell me. Things to think about, you know?

This experience influenced her to be more diligent with how frequently she checks in with students to learn about their stress levels. Several times in each interview, participants mentioned learning from experiences, explaining how they came up with a strategy, and sometimes even reflecting on the effectiveness of a strategy as they were speaking of it. All of these habits are indicative of a caring teacher devoted to life-long learning.

Continual learning and effective reflection throughout one’s career ensures that students are coming into a school where their teachers know about the problems they might face and have possible ways to help them succeed in the face of those problems. As discussed, there are multiple avenues that teachers can take to learn about anxiety and mental health if they find some resources are unavailable. If educators maintain an interest in student well-being, then students can continue to benefit from those that take the time to learn how to support them.

4.1.2 Beliefs about academic anxiety

There seems to be a continuum of teacher beliefs regarding how academic anxiety affects students, as reported by the participants. On one end of the spectrum there are teachers who criticize anxiety and do not believe it can be a disorder, therefore students should not let it affect their well-being and academic success. On the other end of the spectrum, there are teachers similar to those interviewed for this research project: they are understanding of how anxiety affects students and willing to accommodate students with or without an Individual Education Plan (IEP). Madelyn described to me the message that all three participants were communicating
regarding undiagnosed students that displayed concerning symptoms: “they don’t have anxiety, [but] they have incredible amounts of stress... The stress levels are so high, and it’s really important to me that I’m making their learning opportunity the best I can make it.” This comment demonstrates a real concern for the students’ well-being and reaffirms her responsibility to monitor student well-being with or without a diagnosis. If ever in doubt when deciding whether or not to accommodate students, Lucas points out that it is actually outlined in the document *Growing Success* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010) that teachers are required to give students multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning. Students benefit from this requirement because there are too many factors out of their control that become barriers to success. Multiple opportunities allow them to present more genuine demonstrations of their knowledge.

For those teachers that do not believe anxiety affects their students as deeply as it does, the goal of teachers like Angela, Madelyn, and Lucas is to change their way of thinking. Angela and Madelyn stated that there are many teachers who lack the “progressive” pedagogy that incorporates consideration for students experiencing anxiety. For example, Angela found herself struggling with teachers in her department who did not believe the IEPs of students needed to be followed, despite the legality of the matter. Resistance from her department members would not always come from places of mal intent, but a misunderstanding instead. “Really? She’s smart, she doesn’t need it,” was a common rationalization that teachers presented to Angela when choosing not to accommodate a student. Comments like these result in Angela’s legitimate worries that many teachers are not sensitive enough to students’ needs.

Connected to the fact that teachers may not believe in the effects of anxiety on student well-being is the understanding of why accommodations are made. According to the participants,
a common occurrence in classrooms is that teachers offer students accommodations only to ensure they quickly complete a task so it can be graded and they can move on. The participants however, took issue with goal of short-term benefits; it is the lasting effects of accommodations that are important to student success. Helping students develop long-term, transferable strategies to cope with anxiety is what genuinely contributes to their quality of life. These transferable skills include coping strategies, time management, self-regulation, and self-awareness. For example, Lucas has previously had difficulties providing a second extension to a student completing an assignment because he found allowing more time was not addressing the issue, but was the easier solution. When the students learned to expect due date extensions, he believed they were creating unrealistic expectations for the future. Reflecting on the situation, Lucas decided that allowing more time was not the best accommodation and it is necessary to find an accommodation more specific to what the student is struggling with that allows for a greater lesson learned.

4.1.3 Attitudes toward demands of the job

Although the interviewees only talked about this briefly, they recognized the time and energy that are required of teachers and explained how great the benefits are that come from this time and energy. Both Madelyn and Angela spoke of creating a classroom culture based on respect, open communication, and safety; Angela called this her “20-day rule.” The first 20 days or four weeks are for teachers to actively work to create this classroom culture so that students feel safe in class and can communicate with teachers. As a department head, she told her department members that curriculum was not the main focus of September because she wanted them to establish relationships with their students and develop a positive classroom climate. Madelyn added to the importance of this strategy by stressing the fact that her student success is
wholly dependent on this month or month and a half devoted to making them feel comfortable communicating with her. Despite time being limited, resourceful teachers can find ways to create moments with students to check in on them and communicate any concerns. A strategy Madelyn will sometimes use is to have a class that involves students working on an assignment requiring limited teacher involvement. She tells her students that the day is a conference day, and because she wants to give each student she is with her full attention, they might not be able to ask her questions during the period. She added, “it does take some mental exercise,” but the time spent with her students is always productive. Angela has used a strategy for several years now where she works with students to create an oral exam before the actual exam. “A little time consuming, but I think the benefits out weigh the [costs].”

Time management and energy are required to succeed as an educator, but this time and energy are also required for the tasks beyond teaching the curriculum such as ensuring student well-being. To ensure their students’ well-being and to stay informed of student issues, teachers should maintain an interest in continuous, life-long learning. Accommodations for students experiencing academic anxiety should benefit the student by working to develop lasting, transferable skills for long-term success. An important component of practices showing commitment to student well-being is to also show commitment to hearing student voices, which is explained in the second theme, Supportive Relationships with Students.

4.2 Supportive Relationships with Students

In order to support a student experiencing anxiety, teachers need to understand their individual needs and differences. To understand each student, it is necessary to create a classroom environment where students feel safe to communicate their needs and differences. This takes time and needs to be consciously developed from the beginning of the semester.
Angela and Madelyn explicitly talked about creating this space for their students and warned that it takes from a month to a month and a half to build up to. However, the communication that teachers and students require to ensure student well-being is wholly dependent on the development of this “safe space”; it is worth the time and energy required to create this relationship. The two perhaps not surprising requirements to understand students are meaningful communication and collaboration between students and teachers.

4.2.1 Communicating with students

Communication with students is hard to avoid during a regular school day. However, meaningful communication with students regarding their well-being is what is necessary for student success. There should be two goals when communicating with students: first to get to know them and second to establish a trusting relationship.

Getting to know the students was necessary to the participants in order to make appropriate accommodations. Without knowing the students, accommodations and lessons were based on uninformed decisions. Knowing a student’s typical behaviours and being familiar with their personality will help teachers identify a stressed student before a moment of panic actually occurs. Lucas pointed out that when he sees “a remarkable change” in student behaviour, he can immediately tell something has to be done to support the student; in order to notice a change, he needed to be familiar with what their typical behaviours were. A simple survey done at the beginning of the semester may inform teachers of student interests and possibly their background, depending on the questions. Through the use of student surveys and conversations with students, Madelyn was able to provide pertinent coping avenues for several students. One student knitted in class to ease anxiety, another took short stress-relieving breaks to plant in the horticultural room, and a third student attended a gym class for ten minutes to release tension.
All three of these students’ coping strategies reflect the emotion-focused coping strategies discussed by Fletcher and Cassady (2010). As practiced by Angela, knowing the demographics of the school as a whole can be an effective way to prepare educators for the semester as well. The faith that students’ families practice, the proportion of the students that are English Language Learners (ELLs) or have IEPs all can inform teachers of what might trigger student anxiety. Anything that can be learned from a student is useful information. As Madelyn stated, “don’t just accept it as anxiety.” Getting to know the students as well as possible to become aware of the factors that contribute to their stress is imperative to their success.

Fostering a relationship with students that involves the freedom to safely communicate without judgement made the students of the participants feel like what they said to their teacher was valued. Participants checked in with their students as often as possible to make communicating a habit and show their students that they care for their well-being. According to an informal survey done twice at Angela’s school in the past few years, approximately 80% of their high school students are confident they can mask their anxiety. Hiding anxiety and letting it go unchecked can have a number of negative repercussions, which is why developing a habit of communicating with students can be so important. Caring about student interests, background, anxiety symptoms and triggers all show the student that they can trust their teacher cares. According to participants, when their students realizes this, they will begin to communicate to more frequently. Students also enjoyed their classes more when they are with a teacher that they know cares. When asked how she could know this, Madelyn simply responded with, “Because they tell me,” only further proving that the communication between her and her students is meaningful and effective. In her earlier years of teaching, Madelyn remembers trying the “tough love” strategy where she would act as the “boss” of the classroom and students had to act as they
would in a traditional classroom setting. There was some merit in this strategy, since students would do their work, but where she suffered was in the level of respect that students gave her. Less respect meant that the feeling of a safe and communicative environment suffered. In these classes, Madelyn was unable to make real connections with students and see them enjoy the classes like her current students do. This result of greater enjoyment and engagement complements the results found by Klem and Connell (2004) that indicated that students were almost three times as likely to have high levels of engagement when they felt their teachers cared about them.

### 4.2.2 Collaborating with students

A student is often a good resource when looking to find appropriate and individualized accommodations. Even if a student is at a loss to what to do, working with the student to determine a course of action has potential to improve the students’ coping methods and learning skills. Communicating with the students was not only for the purpose of hearing what students were feeling and making the appropriate accommodations. At times where it was appropriate and benefited the student, participants would also collaborate with the student in making a decision. “Transaction learning,” as named by Madelyn, seems to be an effective way for teachers to provide students with individualized accommodations. Although only given this title by Madelyn, all three participants used this strategy to inform their pedagogy. Teachers might often enter a classroom thinking they are the holders of all knowledge; with transaction learning, teachers use students’ lived experiences with anxiety to help them teach and accommodate. A student knows their anxieties better than anyone else, especially if they typically try to mask it. Working with students to learn more about their learning needs has proven to benefit all three participants throughout their years as teachers.
Participants used collaboration with students throughout the semester for different purposes. Angela starts each semester with a collaborative task where her class creates a list of classroom expectations or rules to contribute to the development of the safe space where students can communicate freely and have their voices heard. She also makes sure to choose test dates as a class to avoid testing students at the same time as their other teachers. Angela even goes as far as allowing students to create test questions for an oral exam. She noticed that a 30% written exam led to extremely high levels of student anxiety. After working with a previous student with exceptionalities, Angela decided to take 10% away from the final exam weight for all students and replace it with a 10% oral exam for all her students rather than only those with IEPs. After each unit, students would submit possible oral exam questions for Angela to choose from. The students greatly appreciated Angela’s collaboration and worked hard to create quality questions that would appropriately measure their understanding. Over the years, Angela has continued to use this strategy with the students because she finds it decreases anxiety levels for all students during the exam season and they enjoy the collaboration. Madelyn worked with students who were nervous presenting in front of the class to find a “half-way” point that both student and teacher agreed demonstrated learning goals and reduced anxiety. Students would still have to present, but how they presented was changed: they could sit at the teacher’s desk rather than standing or they could have their voice recorded on the PowerPoint slides instead of speaking in front of the class.

Not only are teachers learning about their students when they participate in transaction learning, but Madelyn reported that her students were learning more about themselves too. Bringing this self-awareness to students increases student control of anxiety and will be explained further in the final theme Student Autonomy.
4.3 Student Autonomy

The beliefs held by teachers about academic anxiety and how they cooperate with students contributes to making students comfortable in the classroom and feel that they have a caring adult in the school, but one more step needs to be taken to ensure student success. Because the teachers that help them in school will not always be present, participants believed there is a need to actively help students learn to control their academic anxiety through helping them explore their own learning needs. Students also need to be able to advocate for themselves in order to ensure they receive the proper accommodations. Lastly, students benefit from being trusted with certain responsibilities as it raises their confidence and contributes to student motivation. Participants worked to achieve these goals with their students so that they could be confident and successful in multiple settings.

4.3.1 Student awareness of learning needs and self-advocating

Participants reported that their students were not aware of what they needed to do to prevent anxiety from becoming a barrier to learning. Helping students become aware of what conditions they need to learn and helping them learn to voice these needs may help them become successful in all classes and outside of secondary school.

A starting point for self-awareness could be a discussion with the student about how their academic anxieties are affecting them. Lucas suggested that if the student has an IEP, why the accommodations in the IEP were chosen and how the condition manifests itself within the student is beneficial to discuss with the student. This may not need to be done by the teacher, as it may have been done when the IEP was administered. If the teacher is unaware of how the IEP affects the student, they should educate themselves as well by speaking with special education teachers or other support staff, as this will only make accommodating the student easier and
more relevant to the student. Teaching students without IEPs about anxiety and mental health can also be important for self-awareness. Schools that have mental health initiatives often have the goal of increasing mental health literacy, so that students and teachers are aware of the conditions and their symptoms; if a student is undiagnosed and struggling, improving the school’s mental health literacy may allow them to understand why they feel a certain way and find the help they need.

Students could benefit from critically considering what makes them anxious and what will help them either decrease their anxiety levels or completely eradicate the anxiety. When coming to an agreement with students on an accommodation, Madelyn asked the student why it would benefit them. This forced her student to consider what the problem really is and what technique might work well to remedy that problem. This can also be asked of students during a check-in conversation. When asking a student how they are feeling and how they think they are doing with regard to school and anxiety, participants described how they asked their students why they feel that way and why something was working well or poorly for them. Students should also be reminded to check their stress levels. Madelyn noticed that her students that experience anxiety often let themselves escalate before they come to her for help. Pointing this out to students adds to their self-awareness and compels them to more frequently consider how their anxiety is affecting them and when to ask for help.

Becoming aware of anxiety triggers, effects, and coping methods is an important step for students to take before learning to ask for specific supports. With self-awareness, students will be able to better monitor their anxiety and ask for more relevant accommodations. Students with or without teachers that work to maintain student well-being should practice self-advocating because in either case, it can still be difficult for the teacher to know, as expressed by Angela...
when discovering the stress her class was experiencing before she rescheduled a test. The participants’ experiences provide evidence that it is worth the time for teachers to create that safe learning space from the beginning of the semester and establish a cooperative and trusting relationship with their students.

4.3.2 Student responsibility

In order for students to be able to overcome academic anxiety in multiple settings, participants believe that they need to practice holding some level of responsibility. All participants in some way or another talked about a minimum level of responsibility that students must maintain in order to ensure success. The teachers maintained expectations for their students while accommodating them, knowing that lowering their standards would result in negative long-term effects on the student. Although lowering expectations may help the student accomplish the task at the time, all participants held the belief that the goal was for long-term, sustainable benefits. An example of accommodating and ridding the student of responsibility that Lucas did not agree with was exempting a student from writing a test or exam. Although some circumstantial issues may prevent teachers from choosing alternative solutions, he recommended choosing an accommodation that still holds the student responsible for demonstrating their understanding rather than excluding them from that expectation. Although anxiety can be extremely affecting for some students, participants believed that there needs to be possible accommodations for students that allow them to follow through with their agreements to complete certain tasks. The example presented earlier where Madelyn collaborated with students that were nervous about presenting still required the students to complete the task and maintained high expectations. She allowed the student to sit at her desk to present or record their voice on the PowerPoint to reduce the pressures that presenters might feel while standing and speaking to
the entire class, but by maintaining the expectation that they must present, the student is still responsible and still practices the skill of presenting. Over time, the students eventually asked Madelyn to present standing in front of the class without accommodations, showing an increase in confidence as a result of the initial accommodation. Giving students a choice in these accommodations instills a sense of responsibility and allows them to take ownership of their learning. As presented by Skinner and Belmont (1993), giving students autonomy leads to higher levels of motivation and engagement. Choice should be incorporated where appropriate and still monitored by the teacher to ensure students are choosing wisely. In addition to being effective when choosing accommodations, choice can be effective in creating a positive classroom environment in September. For example, Madelyn allows a fluid seating plan in her classroom where students can choose where they sit so long as it does not prevent them or other students from paying attention in class. This stipulation reminds students that their choices can affect their academic success.

4.4 Conclusion

Through interviews conducted with three Greater Toronto secondary teachers, three main themes informed me of what is most important when looking to provide genuine learning opportunities to students with academic anxieties. Teacher philosophies, establishing supportive relationships with students, and student autonomy all influence learning opportunities. Together, they contribute to students gaining confidence, becoming more engaged in their academics, and experiencing less academic anxiety.

Teacher philosophies about continuing learning throughout their career, about how anxiety affects students, and what amount of time and energy they plan to devote to their students is a major underlying factor that provides a basis for student success. If teachers do not
show a dedication to learning as they continue to teach, do not believe academic anxiety is an issue worth addressing, and do not want to devote the energy to helping their students, then the remaining suggestions in this chapter cannot make a difference. For schools whose teachers’ philosophies do not agree with supporting students with anxiety, the focus of initiatives should be working to change teacher perceptions through education and awareness of student anxiety. Only then can teachers work toward improving the academic success of students experiencing anxiety. There is however, a concern that teachers are sometimes alone in their support of students, as there is a need for more mental health professionals in schools, agreeing with the literature (CTF, 2012; Reinke et al., 2011).

Understanding students as individuals is the next step in working towards success for students with academic anxiety. In order to create personalized and relevant accommodations, teachers must communicate and collaborate with their students, using the students’ lived experiences to inform their pedagogy. This idea of transaction learning creates a classroom environment where students can feel comfortable communicating with their teacher and safe amongst their peers. Creating this environment has been noted as completely essential by participants, otherwise teachers risk students being closed off and unmotivated in their academics.

Student control over academic anxiety is the final step and goal in creating opportunities where students can be successful. With the support of their teacher in a safe and communicative environment, students should be encouraged to learn more about their learning needs and become comfortable advocating these needs to teachers and other figures in charge of their education. Becoming more aware of what supports they need to succeed should be combined with maintaining high expectations and making sure they are upholding certain responsibilities.
This aligns with the idea of autonomy support as discussed by Skinner and Belmont (1993). When teachers allow students freedom to make decisions about their behaviour and education, the result is increased student motivation and engagement. As used by the participants, autonomy support also has the potential to enhance responsibility and decrease academic anxiety when used appropriately. The overall goal for the participants is longstanding control of academic anxiety to ensure lifelong success for students.

Several of the suggestions found in this chapter might be seen as common sense to many educators. Although much of the information presented is far from revolutionary, it is important that the experiences of the three participants be shared as a reminder of how sensitive student success can be. Many factors that are out of students’ control such as teacher philosophies can be quite damaging to students’ futures. I am also aware there are circumstantial factors that may make certain suggestions more or less realistic, but this was not meant to be an exhaustive list of ways to create better learning opportunities for students with anxiety. Teachers and schools should use this research as a source of ideas to modify their own initiatives to better suit their communities. Chapter five will discuss the implications of these results and identify the divergences and convergences with relevant literature.

**Figure 1.** Teacher practices resulting in student success when considering academic anxiety.
Chapter Five: Implications

The findings discussed in Chapter Four hold certain implications for the educational and research communities. Although the participants did not present novel information to the research that was discussed in Chapter Two, two interesting ideas arise: many practices that are in use are supported by research despite the apparently large gap between research and practice; and the same problems persist regarding lack of teacher support. Despite the problems of lack of teacher training and support, the participants were able to act as model teachers in their accommodation of students experiencing high levels of stress or anxiety. Although there are some significant limitations in what this study can deduce, their practices show potential to be applied to the general student population as well as those students considered to be at risk due to their academic anxieties. In this chapter, I review the key findings and their significance before delving into the possible implications for the educational and research communities, as well as potential areas for future research.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and their Significance

As presented and discussed in the previous chapter, the participants raised many concerns about their students and their abilities to help these students. Teachers continue to struggle supporting students with high stress and/or anxiety due to their lack of training and support from mental health professionals, an issue previously raised in research (CTL, 2012; Whitley, Smith, & Vaillancourt, 2012; Reinke, Stormont, Herman, Puri, & Goel, 2011). This is not to say that mental health professionals are unwilling to help, but participants found that they were unable to be present in their schools due to the high demand for the few professionals hired by school boards. In terms of training aside from additional qualifications, the training was all in-service in the form of workshops or during professional development (PD) days, and were sometimes
presented as optional. Teachers reported seeing colleagues not engaged or even present in these training sessions, and admitted that they themselves do not always take advantage of the PD. Therefore, although there are some forms of training available for teachers, it does not always result in teacher learning. Most, if not all, of the research regarding teacher preparedness in student mental health issues support the idea of implementing PD opportunities, but the review done by Whitley, Smith, and Vaillancourt (2012) states that “one-off” workshops are not sufficient to train teachers to support students. This in combination with statements made by my participants raises concern about the effective use of funding dedicated to supporting student mental health.

The main, general strategy employed by the participants was student-teacher collaboration. The participants turned to communication and collaboration with the students to find the most appropriate techniques for each specific student. Although two out of three of the participants had training related to student mental health, all three relied mostly on their experiences with students suffering from anxiety and the lessons they learned from reflecting after using certain strategies. Teachers made time to talk with students to either hear explicitly or to interpret cues from the student to learn about their mental health status. The participants recognized that this often takes a considerable amount of time, but it was “worth it” for them to gain insight to the students’ emotional state. The participants had individually determined that getting feedback and ideas from their students regarding their learning preferences was a productive task. Although the teachers all valued students’ input, none of the participants approved of lowering standards for the students. In severe cases of anxiety, expectations were slightly changed, but not to be below the expectations held for the other students in the class. This practice of collaborating with students, maintaining high expectations, and giving
responsibility complements the idea of student autonomy which has been researched to be effective in motivating and engaging students (Skinner & Belmont, 1993), but now shows potential for decreasing academic anxiety. By involving students in their academic decisions, participants felt that the students became more engaged and their stress or anxiety was more manageable. Empowering the students by instilling responsibility and maintaining high expectations is a strategy that has potential for all students, not only those with anxiety. Resonant of culturally responsive pedagogy, this technique draws on students’ lived experiences to create appropriate instructional practice. Following the “notion that learning is a socially mediated process and related to students’ cultural experiences,” (Irvine, 2010; see also Howard, 2003) collaborating with and learning from students about their stress and anxiety has great potential to be an effective strategy in accommodating these students, but equally as important, all students.

5.2 Implications

This research project brings forth several important points that have certain implications for myself as a teacher as well as the professional research community. However, there are certain limitations of the study that may influence the implications that are to be discussed. Because my participants teach in a small geographical area in south-central Ontario, the state of student mental health in their schools may differ greatly from other schools across the province. Additionally, the participants were contacted based on their extensive experience with students facing academic anxiety; teachers that lack this experience may face different barriers that are currently unknown to this study. Lastly, the research project grouped high stress levels and anxiety in one category to avoid failing to address students who had not been diagnosed with anxiety, but still required mental health support. This generalization potentially skews the need for teacher training and the effectiveness of accommodations used. Despite these limitations to
the generalizability of the findings, this research project offers a unique perspective of secondary teachers in south-central Ontario that may be important for future initiatives to improve student mental health.

5.2.1 My professional identity and practice

As a new teacher only just entering the field, there are many features of the job I find intimidating. With all the roles I am expected to take on, I am concerned I will not be able to support all of my students in the ways that they will need me to. Recognizing students with mental illnesses and learning dozens of techniques and procedures that are best to use is a daunting task. With this research, however, I have gained a new appreciation for student-teacher collaboration and its possible benefits for students experiencing academic anxiety or stress. Working with students is not a novel strategy that teachers will use in their classrooms, but using the strategy for the purpose of reducing academic anxiety is a concept I am new to. This may provide hope to those teachers who, like me, are worried about the various students they must consider. Collaborating with students has potential to be considered a universal design for learning (UDL) which not only benefits the teachers trying to employ numerous different strategies, but also means that fewer students will struggle. With the incorporation of student-teacher collaboration into all classrooms, there is potential for students to feel safer and more engaged, helping more than just the students with high stress or anxiety.

5.2.2 The professional research community

The strategy document *Open Minds, Healthy Minds* developed by the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care in Ontario stated that mental health training of professionals including educators was one of their goals in 2011. Although there has been funding allocated for this training, my research project reveals that there may be need for greater efforts to improve teacher
training. In order to improve the training, investigations may need to take place to determine exactly what teachers are in need of; this may vary between district school boards or communities, as well as between faculty members, as some teachers may have more extensive training than others. This may drastically affect the mental health initiatives in Ontario, especially their funding allocation. There is already a great focus on improving mental health for Canadians through the use of schools as places where students can be recognized and provided with support, however, the training that is currently in place has not yet proven to be effective.

Although the training is not yet adequate, the teachers interviewed in this research project have managed to utilize several strategies that are supported by research looking at student engagement, motivation, and success. Thinking of the finding by Reinke et al. (2011) that many teachers are unaware of what evidence-based practices are, I was surprised to find the participants using practices that did reflect those used in studies to increase student engagement and success. Although the goal was to decrease academic anxiety, the gap between research and practice may be less significant than originally supposed, even if the participants were unaware that their practices were supported by research. I do not suggest that the goal to link research and practice be forgotten, but perhaps it should take a different route, where teachers are surveyed without using research terminology such as “evidence-based practice.” This may minimize the language and culture barrier between researchers and teachers to more accurately investigate the gap between research and practice.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the literature and the findings of my research I suggest that more research take place surrounding secondary students’ stress and pedagogical strategies to reduce stress and that drastic changes be made to in-service teacher training. This training will involve connections to
research and practical strategies that will occur over a long-term basis, be relevant to the school community, and consider teachers’ varying degrees of understanding of student anxiety.

5.3.1 Research on student-teacher collaboration

Although the participants reported that student stress and anxiety were more manageable when collaborating with the students and including them in the goal-making process, research should be done on the student perspectives of how student-teacher collaboration affects them. There has been research on the positive influence of the presence of teachers in student motivation and success (Davis, 2003; Klem, & Connell, 2004), but with more elementary data than secondary, thus a study performed with secondary student participants would be enlightening. This research will also help to determine if this strategy should be considered a universal strategy for learning that can help all students succeed, not only those experiencing anxiety. If this research proves the strategy to be beneficial, it should be included in pre- and in-service teacher training to help close the gap between research and practice by informing teachers of evidence-based practices.

5.3.2 Revising the structure and focus of in-service teacher training.

In-service teacher training should be long term and continuous, rather than isolated workshops on professional development days. I recommend continuing (or starting, in the case of schools who do not use) the practice of professional learning communities (PLCs) as they allow for conversations and investigations to continue beyond workshops. Fostering a school community based on teacher collaboration may be difficult, but will help PLCs to last and be effective. Furthermore, teacher training should shift its focus from just recognizing mental health to real strategies and techniques teachers can use with students. This in combination with the use of PLCs will allow teachers to take ownership over their learning and find solutions relevant to
their community and students, as needs will differ between school communities and district school boards.

**5.4 Areas for Further Research**

As discussed in the previous section, additional research should be performed regarding the effectiveness of student-teacher collaboration in reducing academic anxiety in a secondary setting. This would be required to effectively implement the other recommendations for the improvement of teacher training. This opens up to other possible areas of interest for further research worth discussing such as the ways anxiety affects students with different comorbidities.

Anxiety and high levels of stress affect students differently and it is commonly expressed by individuals with other mental illnesses. As briefly mentioned in the introduction chapter, there is high coincidence of students comorbid with ADHD and anxiety (Schatz & Rostain, 2006; Sciberras, Lycett, Efron, Mensah, Gerner, & Hiscock, 2014). Anxiety is often expressed quite differently in students with ADHD and a qualitative study on teachers’ perspectives of accommodating students comorbid for ADHD and anxiety would strengthen the educational community’s understanding of what is best for these students.

It would be a large undertaking to research fully how anxiety affects students comorbid with other mental illnesses differently, but may present interesting findings that could contribute to our understanding of universal design for learning and accommodations specific to certain students. This research project broadly addressed both high stress levels and academic anxiety, which presents certain limitations when making conclusions about accommodations that benefit student success. Investigating how students are affected similarly and differently by anxiety will open up discussion and hopefully investigation of general and student-specific strategies that will motivate and engage these students in their learning.
5.5 Conclusion

This small-scale, qualitative study presented the perceptions of and strategies used by secondary teachers while accommodating students that experience high levels of stress and/or academic anxiety. The findings of this research project do not present any novel cases of training success or accommodation strategies, but the fact that the teacher preparedness and student stress are repetitions of previous issues from the literature raise the concern that students with anxiety are not receiving the supports they need. A restructuring and refocusing of teacher training that includes evidence-based practice is required to support teachers in their work encouraging student engagement and success while reducing academic anxiety. The accommodations and considerations made by the participants for students with academic anxiety have potential to benefit all students in the classroom and provide an enhanced learning environment. Through research and deliberate implementation of effective teacher training, school experiences for students suffering from anxiety or other mental health issues can be positive and productive.
References


Appendices

Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: ___________________

Dear ____________________,

My name is Emily O’Connor and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on secondary school teachers’ instructional responses to reducing academic anxiety in students with ADHD or attention difficulties*. I am interested in interviewing teachers who have had a minimum of 5 years of teaching experience, have demonstrated leadership, commitment, and/or expertise in the area of accommodating students with anxiety, and have experience modifying their classrooms and teaching methods to better suit these students. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45- to 60-minute interview, which will be audio-recorded and transcribed. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a research conference or publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. The data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only other person who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor Dr. Arlo Kempf. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. While there are no known risks to you assisting in the project, depending on your experience with ADHD* and/or students with anxiety, some questions may trigger an emotional response from you. To minimize this, I will provide a few minutes at the beginning of the interview for you to review the questions and I will remind you that you can refrain from answering any question that makes you uncomfortable.
Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. A second copy is provided for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Sincerely,

Emily O’Connor
Email: es.oconnor@mail.utoronto.ca
Phone number: (647) 632-4572

Instructor’s Name: Arlo Kempf
Email: arlo.kempf@utoronto.ca

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Emily O’Connor (researcher) and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to having the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: __________________________________________________________________

Name (printed): __________________________________________________________________

Date: _______________

*Note: The consent letter requests that participants have experience working with students that have ADHD because this was the original research topic. After interviewing all participants, I decided to focus on academic anxiety alone based on the heavy focus of anxiety in the data gathered.
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the interviews, it should take up only 45 to 60 minutes of your time. My research aims to learn about methods secondary teachers use to accommodate students with anxiety through 23 questions, asking about professional background information, your practices in the classroom, your beliefs and values, and lastly some challenges you face and some next steps.

Depending on your experiences with anxiety and students with anxiety, some of the questions may trigger an emotional response. So if you would like to, I can give you a couple minutes before we start to review the questions and at any time you can choose not to answers questions that you’re uncomfortable answering. When I put the interviews to text, I will assign you a pseudonym to protect your identity, and you also have the option to review the transcripts for accuracy.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Section 1: Background Information

1. Can I ask you to please state your name for the recording?
2. How many years have you been teaching?
3. What grades and subject areas have you taught/are you teaching?
4. Can you tell me more about the school you currently work in? (demographics, size, program commitments, clubs, climate)
5. You are participating in this interview as a teacher committed to supporting students with anxiety. Can you tell me how you developed this commitment? What experiences developed your interest, commitment, and/or confidence in this area?
   a. Probe: personal, professional, pedagogical experiences they have had
6. Does the school you currently work at have any programs or clubs directed towards helping students experiencing anxiety or other mental health issues?
   a. If so, can you please describe these programs/clubs and how they operate?
7. Do you have any role in programs inside or outside of school related to supporting student mental health and/or anxiety?
   a. Please describe your role(s).
8. Have you received any formal professional development training on how to modify your classroom and teaching to better accommodate students with anxiety, specifically?
   a. If yes, from where did you receive this training? (e.g. AQ from teacher Ed program, PD from school/board, community organizations, individual training programs, professional association)
Section 2: Teacher Practices

9. How frequently do you find yourself modifying aspects of your classroom teaching to accommodate anxious students?

10. Do you find anxiety common in your students? How common would you say it is?
   a. What indicators of anxiety do you observe from students?
   b. What are some other means through which you identify students with anxiety?

11. In your experience, what are some of the reasons why students experience anxiety?
   a. In your view, how might some of these reasons be minimized or alleviated through students’ experience of schooling?
   b. How do you personally work to minimize or alleviate these experiences for students?

12. Do you find that these reasons for anxiety differ between students of different ages, demographics, genders, etc.?
   a. If so, what differences have you noticed?

13. Can you give me an example of how you have modified your instruction for a student with anxiety in order to try to minimize or alleviate their anxiety?
   a. Who was this student? What did you know about their experience with anxiety and how did you come to know it?
   b. What learning goals guided your instruction with this student?
   c. What opportunities for learning did you create to minimize or alleviate this student’s anxiety?
   d. How did this student respond to your approach? What did you observe from them in terms of the effectiveness of your approach?

14. Can you give me an example of a time when you attempted to modify your instruction for a student with anxiety, but the methods were not effective or even detrimental?
   a. Who was this student? What did you know about their experience with anxiety and how did you come to know it?
   b. What learning goals guided your instruction with this student?
   c. What opportunities for learning did you create to minimize or alleviate this student’s anxiety?
   d. How did this student respond to your approach? What did you observe from them in terms of the effectiveness of your approach?

15. Do you find that students will learn how to avoid the anxiety themselves, or are the accommodations consistently required?
   a. From your experience, what contributes to this learning/lack of learning (depending on answer)?

Section 3: Beliefs and Values

16. Why do you believe it is important to support students with anxiety?

17. In your view, how well do schools support students with anxiety and mental health issues?
18. Has your attitude towards or beliefs about student anxiety changed over your years of teaching?
   a. If so, what has changed?
   b. Why has your attitude changed?
19. Has your instructional response to anxious students changed over your career?
   a. If so, what has changed?
   b. Why has it changed?
20. Do you believe there are situations in which you shouldn’t modify your classroom to accommodate a student’s anxiety?
   a. Which situations/when?
   b. What has contributed to your thinking on this?

Section 4: Challenges, Supports, and Next Steps

21. What specific challenges do you encounter in this work?
   a. How do you respond to these challenges?
   b. How might the education system better support you to respond to these challenges?
22. What range of factors and resources support you in this work?
23. Do you have any advice for beginning teachers and other teachers who are less confident in their ability to accommodate students with anxiety?